

# Case study: Targeted therapeutic education for school staff

**This summary outlines how a secondary school and care provider worked well together to support a smooth transition for a young person in care with complex challenges.**

## Case Overview:

Matthew\*, 12 year old male, has been residing with his current statutory carers for several years in regional Victoria. He has multiple diagnosed disabilities and struggles with communication, problem solving and maintaining social relationships. Matthew often responds to perceived threats with aggression and occasionally missing school.

At Matthew's primary school, there were many designated staff to support him when things were not going well for him. Other students were aware of his challenges and understood of the responses provided by staff to support Matthew.

Matthew's secondary school had a much larger population, and the roles of staff and systems at secondary school were very different from the small primary school Matthew had been attending.

## Challenge:

Matthew initially settled into secondary school with little concern for the first several weeks. His year level coordinator established a relationship with Matthew, making their office space available for morning catch-ups and a safe space to go. The coordinator regularly consulted with the care team for recommendations on strategies to improve Matthew's school experience and would share strategies that staff were successfully using.

Towards the end of term 1, other staff who were not familiar with Matthew, reacted to his 'misbehavior'. Matthew was getting in trouble more regularly for things such as swearing, refusing to do as he was told and arguing. On one occasion, Matthew and another child began physically fighting and Matthew was suspended on the spot for his behaviour.

*\*name changed for privacy reasons*

**Question: What steps could a primary school take to ensure a smooth transition to secondary school?**

### Suggestions:

- Ask the young person what will make them feel safe and supported when moving to secondary school
- Invite secondary school staff to one or more of the student's Student Support Group meetings prior to the end of year 6
- Provide the secondary school with relevant documentation, plans and strategies that have been successful in supporting engagement

**Question: How might a secondary school support Matthew's return to school and ongoing engagement, post suspension?**

### Suggestion:

- Ask the young person what will make them feel safe and supported
- Ask the carer for their suggestions on what supports work well with the young person at home
- Meet with relevant school staff to debrief on the incident and discuss what could have been done better
- Develop a return to school plan with clear communication protocols for incidents. Circulate to relevant staff

## What approach worked?

### Problem solving, communication and collaboration

The principal and coordinator met with Matthew, his carer and case worker and discussed how the situation could have been better addressed at the time. It was recognised that not all staff were aware of Matthew's needs and trauma background. While the school had completed some trauma informed training, it was agreed that Matthew's case worker and therapeutic specialist would come to the year 7 staff meeting to discuss Matthew's behaviour through a trauma lens.

### Tailored trauma-informed training in practice

During the 45-minute presentation, the case worker and therapeutic specialist explained the concepts of sensory overload and [Hand Model of the Brain](#), and briefly outlined Matthew's trauma and strengths.

The case worker and specialist did an activity to demonstrate sensory overload. Volunteers were sought from the group. One was required to read an extract from a book. The others activated the person's senses; one poking them in the back, another flashing a torch in their eyes, another doing star jumps in front of them, another making loud noises. This gave staff a better understanding of what it feels like to have such a sensory onslaught.

Matthew's therapeutic specialist shared some extracts from his therapeutic response plan to help the group better understand Matthew's history and his responses in certain situations. This session was grounded in trauma theory and its practical application.

The pair discussed Dan Siegel's 'Hand Model of the Brain', relating it back to the sensory overload activity and the known factors that could contribute to particular behaviours by this young man.

During the session school staff were asked to identify Matthew's strengths and highlight strategies they had already found useful in the classroom to support Matthew's regulation.

Feedback from staff at the end of the presentation was positive. In particular, they found it useful to be reminded of Matthew's strengths to shape how they responded to his needs.

The Centre extends our thanks to Brophy Youth and Family Services for their involvement in the development of this case study and for their innovative approaches to working with young people in care.

Do you have an inspiring case study you would like to share which has contributed to better engagement in education and improved outcomes for children in care? Please contact Sarah Ryan via [sarah.ryan@cfecfw.asn.au](mailto:sarah.ryan@cfecfw.asn.au) to share your great work and inspire others to lead change for children and young people in care.